

# ПОЛИТИЧЕСКИЙ БЕСТСЕЛЛЕР: АДАМ ПШЕВОРСКИ ПРЕДСТАВЛЯЕТ КНИГУ «DEMOCRACY IN A RUSSIAN MIRROR»

## 1. *The Idea*

### 1.1. *Motivation*

Let me first explain the title: “Democracy in a Russian Mirror.”

We are going through times when the value, the feasibility, and the prospects of democracy are under intense scrutiny in different parts of the world:

(1) Several aspects of the functioning of democracies in the West are currently a source of intense dissatisfaction among their citizens. Everyday life of democracies is not a very pretty picture. Indeed, at one time we thought that the title of the book should be “Really Existing Democracies.” There is widespread dissatisfaction that democracy seems unable to generate equality in the socioeconomic realm, to make people feel that their political participation is effective, to assure that governments do what they are supposed to do and not do what they are not mandated to do, and to balance order and non-interference in private lives.

(2) In turn, governments and their ideologies in many non-democratic countries claim that while democracy is a universal value, it does not have to assume the same forms as those in the West. Different projects of “Non-Western democracy” claim that the “essence” of democracy is “the unity of the government and the governed” (a phrase coined by Carl Schmitt) and that the existence of political opposition and the institution of choosing governments through elections are not necessary for democracy. In such views the form of democracy must depend on cultural traditions or at least some countries are not “yet ready” for democracy in the Western sense.

Yet note that “democracy” is a universal ideal: even those who reject its really existing forms still want to claim this label, to be con-

sidered as such. Even the “Democratic People’s Republic” of North Korea claims this label. The normative appeal of democracy — the values of self-government of the people, of political equality and of political liberty — continue to animate people around the world, even in places that were long thought to be immune to their appeal.

These debates pose several general questions about democracy:

(1) Must some “pre-requisites,” cultural or material, be fulfilled for democracy to become possible?

(2) If democracy can be established only under some conditions, does it imply that these conditions are sufficient for democracy to emerge?

(3) Is the “strong state” a pre-requisite for democracy or an obstacle to it?

(4) Are democratic reforms from above credible or must the impetus come from below?

(5) Is the normative appeal of democracy a teleological force propelling all societies toward this goal or is the Western model of democracy a parochial one?

I hope that you can now see why one would think about Russia when posing these questions. These are questions with which you live every day. Our intent, thus, was to examine these theoretical questions about democracy by focusing on Russia: this is why the title.

This brings us to the analysis of Russia, but ...rst more about the volume.

## 2 *The Volume*

### 2.1 *Participants*

The book resulted from the initiative of Andranik Migranyan, whose idea it was to insert discussions of Russia in the general context of analyses of democracy. What fol-

lowed were several intense discussions among a group of Russian and non-Russian political scientists. I do not need to introduce the Russian contributors who are, in order of their appearance in the volume:

Andranik Migranyan  
Mikhail Ilyin  
Valery Solovei  
Boris Makarenko  
Alexei Voskressenski  
Andrei Melville

The non-Russians, in turn, include  
Stephen Holmes, American, at New York University Law School

John Dunn, British, at the University of Cambridge

Pasquale Pasquino, Italian, working at CNRS, Paris

J.M. Maravall, Spanish, at the Universidad Complutense, Madrid

Ian Shapiro, South African, at Yale myself, Polish, at NYU

John Ferejohn, American, at New York University Law School

## 2.2 Disagreements

This is a group with heterogeneous experiences and ideas, so that you should not expect to find much consensus in the volume. We argued and argued but were left with some sharp disagreements, some open questions, and many uncertain ties.

Note that this was not a Russia-U.S. project but an international one. It also bears emphasis that the disagreements were not between Russians and non-Russians.

It was a daring project, possible only because of Andranik Migranyan's courage to pursue it in spite of all the risks.

As a result, the volume is highly controversial, as we have seen in the reactions of its reviewers for the Russian and the US presses. The US reviewers intensely disliked some contributions; the Russian reviewers targeted their criticism on others. Hence, the fact that the book is being published by MGIMO and will be published by Cambridge Univer-

sity Press is a testimony that at the end ideas prevail over fears.

## 3 Open Issues

Two questions loom large throughout the volume.

One concerns the relation between the state and democracy: Is a "strong state," at least in some sense of this term, a pre-requisite of political competition or does the state become strong only when it functions under the conditions of

political competition?

The second concerns the pre-conditions of democracy and the potential for democratic reforms from above.

### 3.1 The state and democracy

What comes first: strong state or democracy?

One view is that the state must be "strong" before peaceful political competition becomes possible.

Clearly, some administrative, bureaucratic capacity is necessary for institutionalized political contestation to be possible, if merely to conduct elections on the national territory. Democracies are hardly viable unless the state has something like the monopoly of force within its territory, the capacity to maintain territorial integrity even in the face of secessionist pressures, and so on. Without such a state, both democracies and dictatorships are brittle.

We agree about these minimum requirements. But does it mean that the state is "strong" when the political opposition to the current rulers is impotent? When police force is overwhelming? When political demands are treated as subversive? When any form of resistance to decisions of the executive is repressed? When dissent in the media is silenced?

A state strong in this sense may only ensure the rule of elites. Centralization of political power in the hands of the state apparatus may just signify the rise of unaccountable

power. The absence of organized opposition need not mean that the state is “strong.” States may appear “strong” just because the civil society is weak.

A contrasting understanding is that a state is “strong” not only when it has the capacity to maintain order, extract taxes and allocate them to public uses, but also when it successfully structures, absorbs, and regulates most of the conflicts that arise in the society without relying on repression. A state is strong in this view if it can withstand the presence of organized conflicts, when it offers incentive for powerful interests to process their conflicts within the institutional, including legal, framework. The state is strong when serious conflicts are resolved by elections the results of which are peacefully obeyed by the conflicting parties. This is how the explosion of May 1968 ended in France with the defeat of the government, how the Spanish general strike in 1988 ended with an election won by the government the following year, how the miners strike in 1974 ended in the UK with an election lost by the government.

In this view the state is strong as an institution when an electoral defeat does not affect the chances of the defeated political forces to compete and to return to power in the same way in future elections.

This perspective means that the boat can be — indeed, must be — built at open sea: cannot stand on one platform to build another. Democracy and the state must be built simultaneously.

### ***3.2 Regime stability and reforms from above***

Another issue about which there are divergent views is whether the current political regime of Russia is a stable system. In one view, it is best seen as a stage in the process of modernization which will spontaneously lead to democracy. In the second view, it is also seen as a stage, but with the expectation that political evolution will result from reforms directed from above. Yet there are also

opinions that it is a stable, perhaps even stagnant, system with weak institutions. Finally, there is a claim that any regime that relies on one person is not stable.

This divergence of views echoes the two central issues of “transitology”: whether democracy requires some economic, social, or cultural pre-requisites and whether it emerges spontaneously once these pre-requisites are present. The question here is whether it makes sense to ascertain that Russia is in some way “not yet ready” for democracy and whether once it would be “ready” it would become one by reforms directed from above. Note that one can accept the modernization framework and still claim that Russia is ready, perhaps has been for some time.

Although we disagree about the importance of cultural traditions, we do agree that some societal preconditions, level of development and pattern of political cleavages do matter. Yet many countries which fare worse than Russia in terms of economic prosperity, level of education, social disparity and many other aspects, advanced further on the path of democratization. A litmus test of sincerity of statements that a country is not ready for democracy is simple: do the arguments about preconditions for democracy serve to justify the status quo or to identify obstacles which need to be tackled and overcome.

Leaving pre-requisites aside, the question is whether democracy can be constructed by an *ukaz* of a strong state. There is something paradoxical in the argument that current rulers must first consolidate their power so that they could give it up. Are declarations of the intention to establish political competition credible? To accept that the passage to democracy is the goal of the rulers requires faith: faith that their political initiatives, rather than consolidating their monopoly of power, articulate a strategy of democratization and faith that this strategy would be continued until it is completed. This strategy could be made credible only by establishing and publicizing a specific agenda of reforms, with steps and dates, the execution of which would be therefore controllable by the

people. Such a commitment was made by Adolfo Suarez in Spain in 1976. But, at least thus far, no such commitment has been made by Russian leaders.

If not from above, what are the prospects of a democratic movement from below? The question here is whether there exists in Russia a “latent demand for change.” Are the Russian masses demobilized from above or are they spontaneously apathetic politically? Can one expect political movements to arise spontaneously? To some extent the issue is methodological: what can be used as evidence of a “latent demand”? Surveys are not a reliable guide. Conversations over vodka may be more telling than surveys but reports from such conversations do not necessarily converge. What we do know is that “apathetic equilibria” sometimes turn out to be very brittle: witness the rise of Solidarity in Poland, which grew from nothing to sixteen million members in six weeks of the summer 1980.

In this view, then, the notion of being “ready” or “not ready” for democracy is always dubious and often hypocritical. Democracy is not born at the point when an overwhelming majority of elites and most of the society become “civilized,” skilled in tolerance and civil culture: this is the product rather than a pre-requisite of democracy.

#### *4 The Future of Democracy*

The future of democracy in Russia will be undoubtedly influenced by the fate of democracy in the rest of the world. Is democracy a universal future of mankind? Is democracy here to stay in the countries that have only recently embraced it? These questions are relevant here because the recent years have witnessed a renewal of doubt about the future of democracy. We increasingly hear the language of “retreat” or “erosion” of democracy. At least three factors can be cited as reasons for being concerned:

(1) The global economic crisis cast a serious shade of doubt over the efficiency of

the Western capitalist model, and by implication, of liberal democracy.

(2) An even more serious damage to the “soft power” of democracy was caused by the unfortunate effort to “export” democracy by the former U.S. administration. The hypocritical use of “democracy promotion” banner in Iraq and Afghanistan undermined the good name of democracy in both democratic and non-democratic countries.

(3) Parallel to that, authoritarian China continued to demonstrate impressive economic and social development, providing an alternative role model to imitate.

Does it all mean that democracy is in fact eroding? Our answer is negative. Unlike the first two waves, the third wave of democracy was not followed by a reverse tide. While several countries that looked promising for democratization failed to make a consistent progress towards it, most reached at least a minimal threshold of democracy and several are making further progress. Some countries which appeared stuck at the turn of the century had a reasonably successful “restart” of transition. Perhaps what has eroded are the hopes that the momentum of the “third wave” would continue infinitely, spreading to more and more countries: a disillusionment of hopes rather than an actual retreat. But the recent events in the Middle East again renewed this hope.

There is no easy way to predict how these trends will develop in the second decade of the 21st century. Yet democracy retains not only its competitive advantages but also its normative appeal. The ability of the people to remove governments through elections allows conflicts to be processed without repression and yet in peace. The prospect that the government will be tested in elections induces the rulers to work hard to promote general interests rather than those of their own or their cronies (“accountability”). In turn, the prospect that they would be able to remove the government if they so wish generates the popular belief that people have something to say about the ways they are governed (“legitimacy”). Obviously, there is more to democracy than chang-

ing governments. But elections in which power is truly at stake are the only mechanism we have known in history through which political conflicts are processed without repression and in, always relative, peace. Moreover, the free flow of information and free competition of ideas have some economic virtues.

These virtues do not mean, however, that the mechanism always works well, that it is possible to establish under all conditions, or that it will be established everywhere. There is nothing inevitable about the progress toward democracy. Neither economic nor social modernization is sufficient to mechanically generate democracy. The controversy in this volume is whether there are some con-

ditions that are necessary for democracy to be established and whether these conditions, if there are any, are present in Russia today. And while all of us agree that democracy is possible in Russia, we still differ sharply about the prospect that this possibility would be realized in the near future.

Indeed, I think this divergence of views is the greatest virtue of the book. We sharpened the questions and the issues, we outlined logically coherent and factually supported positions on these issues, but did not pretend that we agree where we did not. What we hope to have achieved is to enlighten the choices facing Russia today, choices that only the Russian people can make.